DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 122 519 EC 082 897

AUTHOR Stanovich, Keith E.
TITLE Political Philosophy and the Mentally Retarded.
PUB DATE Apr 76
NOTE 20p.; Paper presented at the Annual International Convention, The Council for Exceptional Children (54th, Chicago, Illinois, April 4-9, 1976)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage
DESCRIPTORS *Child Advocacy; Exceptional Child Education; Historical Reviews; *Mentally Handicapped; *Political Attitudes; Politics; *Public Policy; Social Attitudes; Social Change; Social Influences; *Social Values; Trend Analysis
IDENTIFIERS Eugenics; Social Darwinism

ABSTRACT

The effects of Social Darwinism, eugenics, and contemporary political conservatism on the status of advocacy efforts for the mentally retarded are reviewed. Provided are historical sketches of Social Darwinism, which viewed the retarded as members of an inferior race, and eugenics, which argued for sterilization of the "genetically unfit". The author examines a resurgence of these two movements in the writings of A. Jensen and W. Shockley and in current conservative political thought. It is emphasized that advocates for the retarded should strive to go beyond notions of charity to influence social attitudes and political philosophy. (CL)

****
* Documents acquired by ERIC include many informal unpublished *
* materials not available from other sources. ERIC makes every effort *
* to obtain the best copy available. Nevertheless, items of marginal *
* reproducibility are often encountered and this affects the quality *
* of the microfiche and hardcopy reproductions ERIC makes available *
* via the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). EDRS is not *
* responsible for the quality of the original document. Reproductions *
* supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original. *
****

ED122519

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

Political Philosophy and the Mentally Retarded

Keith E. Stanovich
University of Michigan

Paper presented at the 54th Annual International Convention of The Council for Exceptional Children, Chicago, Ill., April, 1976.

Author's Address:
Department of Psychology
University of Michigan
330 Packard Road
Ann Arbor, Michigan
48104

EC082897

136

Today I would like to talk about the larger social and political atmosphere in which advocacy efforts are unavoidably embedded. I should perhaps mention here that the primary focus of my remarks will be mental retardation, but it will easily be recognized that many of the points apply equally well to other handicapped groups.

For special interest and advocacy groups to be effective, it is necessary that they understand the politics of the issues that concern them. As Knitzer (1971) has stated, "After a decade of experimentation with social change policies, the professional has come to appreciate that social priorities and programs are alternately beneficiaries and victims of a fundamental political process. Advocacy, in that it is inherently and unabashedly political, reflects a crystallization of this awareness and an attempt to create new strategies for social change (p. 699)." Recognizing this fact, the various special interest groups in our society have almost, without exception, all developed relatively coherent social and political philosophies to guide their actions. However, the professional and lay spokesmen for the mentally retarded have largely failed to develop a unified political philosophy for their movement.

This lack of a coherent political philosophy seems to stem from the tacit assumption that the issues of rights and treatment for the mentally handicapped are apolitical. This mistaken idea stems from a failure to come to grips with two important issues.

The first is that, historically, the treatment of the mentally retarded has been greatly influenced by the prevailing political and

social attitudes. Thus, it is essential that advocates maintain a historical perspective. The second point is that the spokesmen for the retarded who have recognized that patterns of social change affecting the mentally handicapped reflect the prevailing political attitudes have generally failed to be evaluative. Most individuals and groups have acted as if divergent political philosophies have similar implications with regard to the handicapped. On the contrary, it will be argued here that the various political views currently held in this society differ in their implications with respect to the welfare of the mentally handicapped, and that the different implications can be used to guide advocacy efforts.

It is to the former point that I would like to turn first. Restated in general terms, it is that the success of a particular social movement is dependent upon the attitudes prevailing in the given society. Thus, an aspect of advocacy that has heretofore been neglected is that of working to change the larger political and social atmosphere in which specific reforms will be accepted or rejected. That this particular aspect of advocacy is of crucial importance is suggested by any review of the history of the treatment of the mentally retarded. Sarason and Doris (1969) draw the connection most clearly, stating, "...at any point in time, society's attitudes towards its deviants are not shaped solely by the scientific theories or facts then available. The theories or facts will be seen to have different implications depending upon the general social matrix in which they occur (p. 227)." Taking the above as a premise, I would like to give a brief historical sketch of a particular social philosophy, both because it had profound

effects on the treatment of the mentally retarded and because its social and political antecedents still exert an influence on social policy affecting the retarded.

The intellectual movement I wish to discuss is the Social Darwinism of the latter half of the nineteenth century. Briefly, the adherents of Social Darwinism attempted to apply the ideas of natural selection and survival of the fittest to human social life. Thus, the fittest of a society (usually defined by the Social Darwinists as those having the most material wealth) were seen as the superior products of an essentially biological process. Similarly, those who were less successful in a given society (the poor, the mentally and physically handicapped, the diseased) were seen as inferior races of mankind. They were depicted as being what they were because of an inferior biological inheritance, rather than environmental deprivation. Thus, man should not tamper with the natural selection process which will allow mankind's inferiors to disappear from the face of the earth. Having these as their beliefs, it is not surprising then, that the Social Darwinists were opposed to social measures that would ameliorate the condition of the poor and handicapped. To quote Herbert Spencer, intellectual leader of the Social Darwinists, "...society is constantly excreting its unhealthy, imbecile, slow, vacillating, faithless members....unthinking, though well-meaning, men advocate an interference which...stops the purifying process (1851, p. 323)."

Social Darwinism occupies a place of importance in the history of mental retardation in that it had a considerable impact on the way the mentally handicapped and underprivileged members of society were perceived

at the turn of the century. Instead of being thought of as victims of adverse environmental circumstances, the retarded were seen as members of an inferior race of mankind. In addition, Social Darwinism paved the way for, and is inextricably linked with, the eugenics movement of the first three decades of this century (Haller, 1963; Hofstadter, 1959; Sarason & Doris, 1969). The eugenicists carried the doctrines of Social Darwinism one step further and argued for restricting the breeding of the "genetically unfit". The eugenics movement is important in the history of the treatment of the mentally handicapped because it was probably the primary advocate of the sterilization and segregation of the mentally retarded. Although their attempts at promoting effective sterilization laws were generally unsuccessful, the eugenicists did achieve success in getting society to accept the idea that the retarded should be segregated in large institutions away from the community. As late as 1976, we are still in the process of reversing this mistaken policy.

The relevance of these two social movements for the primary theses of the present paper cannot be overemphasized. It is important to realize that Social Darwinism (and its stepchild - eugenics) arose not just as a neutral application of Darwinian principles to social life, but as a biological justification of specific political and economic doctrines. Social Darwinism was conceived as an attempt to find justification for laissez-faire economics in natural laws. Indeed, Spencer's seminal work, Social Statics, preceded publication of Darwin's The Origin of the Species by eight years. The term Social Darwinism is thus somewhat of a misnomer, since Spencer had argued against government interference in aid of the

poor long before Darwin's work was brought in as a justification.

That Social Darwinism was used to bolster laissez-faire economics and conservative political doctrine has been amply documented by several authors. Hofstadter (1959) has stated:

> Darwinism was seized upon as a welcome addition... to the store of ideas to which solid and conservative men appealed when they wished to reconcile their fellows to some of the hardships of life and to prevail upon them not to support hasty and ill-considered reforms. Darwinism was one of the great informing insights in this long phase in the history of the conservative mind in America. It was those who wished to defend the political status quo, above all the laissez-faire conservatives, who were first to pick up the instruments of social argument that were forged out of the Darwinian concepts (pp. 5-6).

Hofstadter further states that Spencer's Social Statics was, "... an attempt to strengthen laissez-faire with the imperatives of biology (p. 40)." Hofstadter, in considering why the Darwinian ideas were distorted in this particular direction, concludes, "The answer is that American society saw its own image in the tooth-and-claw version of natural selection, and that its dominant groups were therefore able to dramatize this vision of competition as a good thing in itself. Ruthless business rivalry and unprincipled politics seemed to be justified by the survival philosophy (p. 201)." In their historical review of Social Darwinism's affect on the treatment of the mentally retarded, Sarason and Doris (1969) also emphasize the link of Social Darwinism to laissez-faire economics, stating, "While the attitudes of the Social Darwinists were undoubtedly formed in large part by their reactions to evolutionary theory and the vivid analogies it suggested between life in nature and life in society, one must also recognize the fundamental influence of classical economic theory.

Spencer's argument needed no Darwin. The classical economists had set the premises. They can be seen in Adam Smith's advocacy of free competition in the market place...(p. 226)." Sarason and Doris also stress the attraction the eugenics movement had for political conservatives: "We can readily imagine that the politically and socially conservative elements in society that had so readily embraced the Social Darwinism of Spencer and Sumner...would readily embrace the newer movement of eugenics which, like the Social Darwinism that preceded it, would advocate not change in the organization of society but the elimination of those who could not or would not successfully adjust to that society (p. 243)." Finally, Haller (1963) in his historical work on the eugenics movement, stated, "...many strands of eugenic thought were a scientific disguise for conservative, often harsh, indictments of classes and races, and eugenics became, for a time, predominantly a conservative creed (pp. 5-6)." In summary, a consideration of the intellectual movement of Social Darwinism illustrates the two major theses of this paper: first, that the treatment of the mentally handicapped is affected by current political and social attitudes, and secondly, that political philosophies differ in their implications for the mentally handicapped.

It is the second point which should be stressed since it seems to have been most neglected. That is, once advocates for the mentally handicapped realize that governmental policies affecting the retarded are dependent upon social attitudes, it becomes necessary for a judgment to be made as to which social and political philosophies have more positive implications for the mentally handicapped. Sometimes this judgment can be made by extrapolation from the past. I would like to argue that this

historical continuity can be observed in a modern intellectual movement that has been gaining steam since the beginning of this decade. The movement is of importance because it has profoundly negative implications regarding the treatment of the mentally handicapped. The intellectual and social movement I am referring to is the resurgence of Social Darwinism (although not by that name) in modern American thought and politics.

In the intellectual sphere, the resurgence of Social Darwinism was spurred by the renewal of the nature/nurture controversy in recent years. The seminal paper in the renewed controversy was the 1969 Harvard Educational Review article in which Arthur Jensen suggested: 1. that the heritability quotient of I.Q. was approximately .80, 2. therefore, programs of remediation for below average students were doomed to failure since I.Q. was primarily genetically determined, and 3. it was a reasonable hypothesis that the lower performance of black Americans on intelligence tests was due to genetic factors. The sequence of events subsequent to the publication of Jensen's paper, though compressed in time, was remarkably similar to that occurring in the earlier period of Social Darwinism discussed previously. Social reactionaries and racists of all stripes seized on Jensen's paper as scientific evidence for their political and social beliefs, even to the extent of distorting Jensen's original work. Others, in a manner reminiscent of the writings at the turn of the century, have suggested eugenic remedies for our social problems. Although posing as dispassionate scientists, these individuals are ever so willing to suggest social policy that incorporates Social Darwinism and eugenics.

The most prominent spokesman in the new eugenics movement is William Shockley. Although not trained in biology or social science (he won the

Nobel Prize for inventing the transistor), Shockley travels the country espousing such an extreme hereditarian viewpoint that it would be laughable if its implications were not so alarming. His hereditarian views are so extreme that he has even suggested that heroin addiction and child battering are genetically determined. Also well known for his writings on the genetic inferiority of blacks, Shockley stated in a 1972 article, "Nature has color-coded groups of individuals so that statistically reliable predictions of their adaptability to intellectually rewarding and effective lives can easily be made...(p. 307)." Shockley has proposed (as an "intellectual exercise") that people with I.Q.'s below 100 be given inducements to be sterilized. Specifically, a person would be given $1000 for each point his I.Q. is below 100. He has discussed several successful and well known early intervention projects with the mentally retarded. Predictably, Shockley's argument against these programs is that they are too costly. The inference left to the reader is that eugenics is more cost effective. What is disturbing to myself and others is the wide circulation Shockley has been given in reputable journals, professional publications, at large conferences, and in lectures at leading universities. Let this not be mistaken as a call for censorship. I am not advocating that Shockley not be heard. However, I do find it surprising that in these days of information explosion and 80% journal rejection rates, that Shockley's ideas are published widely when other researchers studying such important topics as children's learning, individual differences, and educational intervention find it hard to get published. This is especially disconcerting since little in Shockley's work is new and much of it is eugenics propaganda. Thus, I am forced to conclude that his intellectual and social philosophies

are becoming increasingly acceptable to modern American intellectuals.

We are touching here on the indirect forms of advocacy discussed earlier, that consisting of working to change larger societal attitudes. The intellectual climate that is being created today is the climate in which new programs affecting the handicapped will be judged. The implications of the resurgence of Social Darwinism are clear, and thus, that intellectual doctrine should be actively repudiated by advocates of the handicapped whenever and wherever it rears its head.

Perhaps more important to a healthy societal atmosphere for the handicapped are developments in the political sphere. However, professionals, advocates, and parents of the mentally retarded have tended to ignore the political implications of the social issues surrounding the retarded. The political philosophies currently held in our society differ greatly in their outlooks toward the mentally handicapped and disadvantaged. In denying this, the spokesmen for the retarded have undermined their own effectiveness.

It is to the political sphere that we shall now turn. While the previous discussion has documented the fact that Social Darwinism is undergoing a resurgence in the intellectual sphere, it has had, since its conception, a continued influence on American politics. Consider that the spectrum of major political philosophies in this country runs from a conservatism emphasizing free competition in the economic market place to a liberalism emphasizing governmental programs as solutions to our social and economic problems. The point to be emphasized is that conservative political philosophy has always contained a strong component of Social Darwinism. Throughout modern American history Social Darwinism has been intertwined

with the free market economic philosophy of conservativism. At times, political figures have stated the doctrines of Social Darwinism quite bluntly, as when Governor Pyle, while serving in the Eisenhower administration, stated that the "right to suffer" was "one of the joys of a free economy" (quoted in Germino, 1972, p. 262). Of considerable relevance to the hypothesis of a link between political attitudes and acceptance of a Social Darwinian position is an extensive biographical study by Pastore (1949). He uncovered a strong tendency for extreme hereditarians and leading proponents of eugenics to hold conservative political views. Similarly, Pastore found that leading exponents of the environmentalist camp were highly likely to have liberal political views.

It will be argued here that the conservative and liberal philosophies have widely divergent implications with regard to policies affecting the retarded. One of the implications is a simple, logical extension of the definitions of these different positions. Conservatives generally subscribe to the idea that the worth of a person's labor should be determined competitively in a free market place. But it certainly follows that if people must compete to sell their abilities in a free market, then those with limited abilities will come out the worst. However, for those that might not fare well in a competitive market place, the liberal position provides an essential safeguard, namely, programs of government subsidization for the losers in the economic battle. The traditional conservative solution for these casualties of the free market has been charity. Historically, however, charity has failed to provide adequately for society's disadvantaged. For example, black Americans fared very badly when it was necessary for them to rely on local "charity" for political

and economic help. It took strong federal action to guarantee economic and civil rights to non-white Americans. Similarly, parents of the retarded have traditionally found community "good will" to be inadequate when it came to creating educational programs for their children. It has taken governmental action on the state level to guarantee mandatory special education.

In an excellent article entitled "What Price Charity?", Pieper (1975) questions the strategy of engaging in large charity efforts on behalf of handicapped children. She adopts a position similar to that of the present author in arguing for government-guaranteed rights, rather than charity. To quote from the article, published in The Exceptional Parent, "Our charitable efforts must be re-evaluated and redirected with a view to long-range societal change. We must stop throwing out pieces of fish when we should be teaching fishing....In an age when my taxes have helped put a man's foot in the dust of the moon, I have been told it would not be 'economically feasible' to 'waste a doctor's time' to get my son's foot on the ground. We have to challenge, not meekly accept, such a schedule of priorities (p. 40)."

Mrs. Pieper's article generated much editorial comment. Some of the comments extended Mrs. Pieper's points in the directions I have been advocating here. Mrs. Sherry Golden, the mother of a handicapped child, wrote:

> It just makes entirely more sense to me for money to be donated to political candidates who support our views and will work for services for all citizens as a matter of right. And for national health insurance that doesn't exclude chronic conditions. And for guaranteed education that doesn't end at age eighteen because some of our children will need education over a lifetime.

> It seems to me that now is the time to rechannel that incredible energy that goes into telethons and door-to-door drives to change public opinion, legislators' votes and the very morality and economic structure of this country. For in the end it really does boil down to point of view and what kind of society we're going to work toward (p. 35, The Exceptional Parent, February, 1976).

Hopefully, it will be recognized that charitable organizations working on behalf of the mentally retarded have a crucial weakness. Since their financial support comes from a broad spectrum of the populace, they are forced into a neutral philosophical position so as not to alienate any segment of the political continuum. Thus they are unable to lobby effectively for the retarded when the issues involved have political implications. This is a severe problem since the plight of the retarded is similar to that of a disenfranchised minority group such as black Americans. Like blacks, the mentally retarded are asking for previously denied jobs, housing, and education. They can best be helped toward these goals by a society that supports progressive social change. Awareness of this fact among the citizens who speak for the retarded will lead to increased political clout for this group.

Perhaps a brief discussion of a contemporary problem in the field of mental retardation will illustrate the point. The creation of community homes for the retarded has become an issue fraught with political implications. In dozens of cities these homes have been opposed by city councils, backed by ad hoc "citizen's committees." These groups have used zoning laws, largely designed to protect well-to-do propertied interests, to block the creation of community homes in their neighborhoods. These same people would gladly give a dollar to a charity for the retarded, but would

simultaneously deny them the basic human right to live independently in society. What the retarded really need is to have the city zoning laws changed so that community homes for the mentally handicapped can be organized. A recent study by Sigelman (1976) is relevant to this issue and to the points argued previously. She found that people who identified themselves as political liberals were more favorable toward group housing for the retarded in residential districts. In addition, liberal respondents were more likely to favor equal opportunity employment for the retarded.

Modern American conservatism, in short, which is rooted in the Social Darwinism of the nineteenth century, emphasizes charity because its tenets are fundamentally opposed to social change. However, the welfare of the retarded greatly depends on some needed social change. Advocates for the retarded should recognize this fact and support the liberal reforms that will provide a more conducive environment for the mentally handicapped.

One policy traditionally supported by conservatives has been a balanced national budget. Interestingly enough, the same people who advocate a balanced national budget simultaneously endorse large expenditures on the Defense establishment. Obviously, larger military spending means smaller expenditures in other parts of the budget. The implications of this policy are obvious. The mentally retarded have nothing to gain from subsidies to Lockheed Aircraft, but have a great deal to gain from federal health or education programs. Why then, have professionals, parents, and advocates of the retarded not protested more vociferously against the destruction of education and poverty programs by the Nixon and Ford administrations? Have they hesitated for fear of involving the cause of the retarded in a "political" struggle? If so, and the author is inclined to believe so,

their hesitation is misplaced. The conservative budget-balancing philosophy, determined to maintain a large military apparatus at the expense of social programs, has clear implications for the mentally retarded. The sooner those concerned wake up to that fact, the better.

One need not look far to see the conservative trend in modern political rhetoric. On the one hand we have seen Ronald Reagan campaigning in the primaries on a platform of increased military expenditures and drastic cuts in health, education, and welfare budgets. On the other hand, we observe President Ford reluctantly signing the "Education for All Handicapped Children Act" and then charging that the bill's supporters are "falsely raising the expectations of the groups affected by claiming authorization levels which are excessive and unrealistic...the funding levels proposed in this bill will simply not be possible if Federal expenditures are to be brought under control and a balanced budget achieved over the next few years (White House Statement, December 2, 1975)."

A recent study by the present author clearly demonstrates the link between political philosophy and support of programs for the mentally handicapped. It was found that Congressmen who were primary supporters of legislation of benefit to the handicapped tended to be significantly more liberal on other issues (as measured by the A.D.A. liberal quotient) than other Congressmen.

The above discussion touches on just a few of the areas where a conservative social and economic philosophy has proven detrimental to the retarded. As the mentally handicapped assume their full and equal place in society, it is inevitable that controversy will occur. The issues of resource allocation, treatment of deviants, individual versus group rights,

and human sexuality all touch the retarded and are fraught with political implications. Fortunately, a few professionals have recently begun to recognize the implications of social phiosophy for policy decisions regarding the retarded. In an excellent article, Morgenstern (1974) has described the three prevalent community attitudes toward the retarded. The first is the primitive belief that the retarded are a sub-human class that should be segregated in institutions so as not to be harmful to the community. Another belief held is that the retarded are "child-innocents" or "God's chosen children." The implications of this attitude are clear to Morgenstern, who states that, under this philosophy, "Assistance to the retarded takes the form of charity and in return, the retarded are expected to be grateful and conforming (p. 159)." The third attitude toward the retarded is that they are "developing persons" whose potential can best be realized by full participation in community life. Morgenstern is essentially in agreement with the present author when he states that, "Attitudes in this category emanate from the enlightened and progressive elements in our society, the same elements that have given impetus to the movement for civil rights for all minorities (p. 160)." Lippman (1972), in his review of attitudes and programs for the handicapped in several countries, essentially concurs with this opinion, stating, "...programs for the mentally retarded in Europe are better than in the United States - in part because attitudes are different (p. 68)." The attitudes that Lippman feels contribute to the development of beneficial programs are egalitarianism, liberalism, and an acceptance of government responsibility for remediating social problems.

In summary, there is ample documentation for the fact that the social

and political philosophies of a society affect the types of programs and treatment that are afforded the mentally retarded. Thus, it must be recognized that we are creating the intellectual climate in which new developments for the retarded will be accepted or rejected; and that we create the climate in part by the political leaders we elect and the ideas we support. A recent editorial in The Exceptional Parent proposed that every national organization concerned about people with disabilities publicize to their memberships the platforms of political candidates on issues of health, education, and welfare for disabled Americans. Although this is a laudable proposal, following the line of argument presented in this paper I would suggest that it does not go far enough. Why not openly endorse and support chosen candidates as do other special interest groups, with much success? The directions in which long-term advocacy efforts should be focused have been alluded to previously. It has been argued that more explicit and aggressive attempts by advocates to influence social and political philosophy will be of long term benefit to the retarded and other handicapped groups. The day has finally arrived for the slogan of the handicapped to be, "No more charity, give us our rights."

References

Germino, D. Modern western political thought: Machiavelli to Marx. Chicago: Rand McNally, 1972.

Haller, M. Eugenics: Hereditarian attitudes in American thought. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1963.

Hofstadter, R. Social Darwinism in American thought, rev. ed. New York: Braziller, 1959.

Jensen, A.R. How much can we boost IQ and scholastic achievement? Harvard Educational Review, 1969, 39, 1-123.

Knitzer, J. Advocacy and the children's crisis. American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 1971, 41, 799-806.

Lippman, L.D. Attitudes toward the handicapped. Springfield, Ill.: Charles Thomas, 1972.

Morgenstern, M. Community attitudes toward sexuality of the retarded. In F.F. de la Cruz & G.D. LaVeck (Eds.) Human sexuality and the mentally retarded. Baltimore, MD.: Penguin Books, 1974.

Pastore, N. The nature-nurture controversy. New York: Columbia University, 1949.

Pieper, E. What price charity? The Exceptional Parent, 1975, 5(1), 35-40.

Sarason, S.B. & Doris, J. Psychological problems in mental deficiency (4th ed.). New York: Harper & Row, 1969.

Shockley, W. Dysgenics, geneticity, raceology: A challenge to the intellectual responsibility of educators. Phi Delta Kappan, 1972, 53, 297-307.

Sigelman, C.K. A Machiavelli for planners. Mental Retardation, 1976, 14, 26-29.

Spencer, H. Social statics. London: John Chapman, 1851.